

The Current State of ELT in Rural Areas: Rethinking the Possibilities

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- ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to present the condition of ELT in rural India. The paper takes a review of the importance of English in various contexts especially with reference to David Graddol's observations in the first section. Then it throws light on some classroom realities through personal experiences, observations and reflections on ELT. In the end, some suggestions are made to make ELT more realistic and student-centric.

Key words: English language teaching; Teaching English in rural areas.

Introduction

English has spread in almost every part of the world and every sphere of life. However, in India, it was and has often remained the hegemony of the elite circle. But with the emergence of global economy, the need for competence in English to get opportunities for social and economic advancements is perceptible not only among the middle class but also among the lower order of the Indian society. Students have not only realized the role of English in shaping their careers but also become aware of the fact that they cannot dream of a bright career by keeping themselves away from English. According to Kachru (1994:542), "The end of the British Raj in the subcontinent was supposed to initiate the slow but sure demise of the English language in South Asia. However, the reality is different. The actual picture is one of ever greater

penetration of English. The functional domains in which English is used have actually expanded rather than shrunk."

In the following sections, the present paper, after making a review of the importance of English in various contexts especially with reference to Graddol's observations, throws light on some classroom realities through personal experiences, observations and reflections on ELT. In the end, some suggestions are made to make ELT more realistic and student-centric.

The Increasing Demand for English

Graddol (2010) focuses on the increasing demand for English. He says "We are fast moving into a world in which not to have English is to be marginalized and excluded." He also thinks that English is a useful *catalyst* which can help us in bringing a drastic social change. It is a basic skill,

necessary for employment and social inclusion. English has certainly acquired the status of link language even within India. Services, even shop or hotel workers, need good communication skills both towards customers and within their own management. Our continual economic growth will depend on the availability of people who can communicate across language and cultural boundaries both nationally and internationally. Many public sector jobs require applicants to pass English language exams.

According to him, government reports, too, have identified improving English competence at all levels. In private sectors, new shopping malls, supermarkets and clothing shops in both metro and rural areas are providing job opportunities for school-leavers and graduates with appropriate skills which include English as one of the most important skills. Tourism sector in the country is witnessing a boom and there is demand for workforce at managerial, supervisory, skilled and semi-skilled levels. Tourism companies and elite hotels need English-speaking drivers, who can earn 2-5 times as much as a driver elsewhere, in addition to receiving the benefits of a job in the organized sector, such as health insurance and a pension. The IT-BPO industry in India directly employs about two million people, but anticipates the need for a further six million in the coming decade. There are fears that India just does not have the English-speaking 'talent pool' to support this level of growth. The social impact of IT has been felt even in rural areas. E-Choupal, introduced by ITC in 2000 gives access to

four million rural families. With access to the internet, farmers can check prices of crops, get weather forecasts, find out insurance information and be informed about new developments in farming techniques. The government of India, having realized this vital and massive growth of English, both within and outside India, calls for a massive expansion of technical and vocational education (Graddol, 2010).

English 'milk of tigris': The Other Side of the Picture

Despite the government's policies to support English education for the deprived sections, teaching English to rural students, as it is the case of roads in rural area, is often not the smooth way to ride on. Students entering into this class are mostly from economically and educationally deprived classes. Most of them endeavour to overcome every hurdle, physical, intellectual, social and economic, in their way. As for English, it is often projected as the "milk of tigris" by their teachers at secondary and higher secondary levels. Consequently, they do not dare go near this 'cruel and wild animal'. Having managed to secure the passing marks by hook or crook, these students enter a senior college with many dreams. But they are poorly equipped to fulfil their dreams as the "Anglophobia" in them is more powerful than the knowledge of other subjects of their study. Realizing the importance of English as the language of opportunity and exposure to the spectrum of knowledge, they develop an aspiration to learn this language. Sadly, they also become aware of their inability to learn

it with some memorized grammatical rules and lessons in answering 'the seen and unseen' passages learnt during their high school and junior college days¹. They realize the wide gap between their previous knowledge and the syllabus of Compulsory English at the UG level, which is designed by assuming their previous exposure to English and aims at testing their skill of reproduction. After striving desperately to get rid of their Anglophobia, they helplessly develop a feeling that 'it's not their cup of tea' and eventually give up their fruitless efforts to drink the milk of this "untameable tigress".

According to Agnihotri and Khanna (1994), "Most of the rural students get deeply frustrated when they realize that all the years of studying English have not equipped them to negotiate successfully ordinary day-to-day encounters that demand the use of English. The select few who do manage to acquire high levels of proficiency in English become willing partners of English. For most, English remains a burden intellectually and a non-starter functionally." In rural and semi-urban areas English is still the language of the elite and the powerful and it is often associated with domains of social prestige. This particular perspective helps widen the social gap between the elite and the "Englishless" masses. Even within the educated English-knowing groups, there is a division between those for whom English has been the medium of instruction in private schools and those who largely learn English as a subject

in ordinary government or government-aided schools. The English medium convents and private schools provide every possible exposure to their students through various means such as audio-visual aids, well-trained teachers in English and required context and situation for the use of English. Hence, with their high proficiency and competency in English, these students grab the opportunities in administrative services both in public and private sectors. On the contrary, in ordinary government and semi-government schools, English used to be introduced at a much later stage, i.e. at 4th or 5th standards. Of course, many state governments have recently introduced English as one of the subjects from the first standard itself. However, according to Vaish (2008: 6), "The pedagogic practice in government schools in India does not inculcate communicative competence in English, which is the demand of the workplace." According to Agnihotri and Khanna (1994), "A textbook is prescribed; teachers are expected to 'cover the portion'. Students must be tested only within the portion covered and the examiner who sets the question paper must ask questions only on the syllabus." We, the teachers in rural area, witness this tragic defeat of our students and seldom experience a sense of satisfaction in teaching.

English in Undergraduate Classes

A quick review of the existing syllabi of Compulsory English at each level, viz.,

¹ Here I refer to the syllabi of English prescribed by Maharashtra State Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, Pune.

primary, secondary and higher secondary, and graduation levels might help us realize that it is designed based on some general assumptions. The classroom realities and students' abilities rarely get any serious attention in this process. In their attempt to bring both national uniformity and standard in the syllabi, our curriculum designers often forget the objectives behind teaching English as a compulsory subject to our students learning in so called vernacular medium schools and colleges. Consequently, the syllabi of English at each level are the products of presumptions. Students' abilities and knowledge of English language and grammar are taken for granted and the syllabus is designed accordingly. Having overcome the hurdles at every level, sometimes by their own hard work and sometimes by the grace of teachers, examiners and moderators and the humanistic evaluation system, our students manage to enter an undergraduate class. However, when the teacher of English enters an undergraduate class, she realizes that her students, although willing to learn and understand English, are not able to understand what is being taught in class. Ironically, in a class where none of the students can make sense of a single English sentence, write a few sentences of English, read and comprehend a single English sentence, the teacher is forced to teach communication skills, to conduct group discussions, to write and present situational dialogues and much more. To make things worse, some textbooks aim at fulfilling these objectives with the help of some short stories, intellectual essays, one-act plays

and poems from foreign literary works. The government, as part of its higher education policy, intends to make it available to the masses and at a time, it expresses its inability to sanction funds to start more classes and divisions and recruit new teachers for it. As a result, large numbers of students are admitted in a single section. Can we dream of the effective implementation of a so called communicative syllabus (foreign texts?) in such overcrowded classes? How can we expect the teacher to conduct group discussions, and carry out role-playing by dividing such large classes in a limited period of 50 minutes? And what about the evaluation method? Doesn't it merely aim at testing the reproductive ability of the students? Obviously, in a situation, where the teacher's efficiency is judged on the basis of the passing percentage of students, the teacher tends to be contented in coaching her students to prepare for the examination. The teacher can seldom play the role of a 'facilitator' recommended in a communicative classroom.

Some Possibilities and Suggestions

In Vaish's opinion, "English is an empowering vocational skill in a globalizing economy" (2008: 1). She further reminds us that Gandhi envisioned an education system that would develop both the spirit and the intellect of the child and in the end provide empowering opportunity for employment and self-sufficiency (2008: 4). If English is to be taught to our students to make them competent enough to meet the demands of modern industrial society and job market

and to bring them into the mainstream of progress and development, we need to think of some of the possibilities of making English language teaching a more productive and student-oriented mission. Can we develop a sensitivity to learner needs and response which, according to Gupta (2005), has been lacking in the academic aspect of ELT in India? Of course, there is a lot to be borrowed from western pedagogical approaches and methodologies in ELT but at the same time we can incorporate these pedagogical ideas to develop a new model which will focus on the needs of the rural students and enable them get rid of their 'Anglophobia'. Could we make learning English an enjoyable experience rather than 'a hard nut to crack' for them?

Revamping the English Syllabi

Lack of proper exposure to the spoken variety is the commonly recognized problem during the formative years of learning among the students from rural and semi-urban areas. As mentioned earlier, the existing evaluative method emphasizes productive skills and learners are forced to concentrate on reading and writing skills. Certainly, these days some attention is paid towards testing oral skills, but the oral examinations are conducted at the end of the academic year. Due to time limit, classroom size, and much emphasis on the written examination, teachers are obliged to cover their syllabus in a given time and consequently learners are not trained for this test. Hence, there is scope for rethinking on the present syllabi of English and also on the evaluation pattern.

To draw and sustain the interest of learners, a proper connection between language and real-life situations has to be established. Instead of plunging the Indian rural learners into the awkward and uneasy imaginary situations by introducing the vocabulary and structures from the urban elite culture and foreign contexts, we should make them feel comfortable by making them use English in the situations from their own real life. Hence, at the primary level the syllabus comprised the maximum use of audio-visual versions of various situations, songs, poems, stories, and conversations from their neighbourhood can be more interesting and enjoyable experience for them. The role of Hindi movies and songs in the spread of Hindi even among the illiterate non-Hindi speakers is a very good example in this context.

Language Laboratory

Of course, the implementation of such a syllabus would cause an extra financial burden on the government because the establishment of the 'Language Laboratory', well-equipped with a television set, DVD/VCD player, voice-recorders, and language improving machines (LIM) etc. at every school would be an additional requirement for it. If teaching-learning process takes place in such encouraging and motivating conditions, it will certainly help increase the inquisitiveness of the learners. This revamping of the syllabi and effective implementation of it in a specially designed 'Language Laboratory' can be a solution to the problem of large classes. It can also be the remedy for the dependence on the

unskilled and less proficient teachers in English at both primary and secondary levels. This method can allow us to divide a large class into small batches so that the students from each batch would be made to participate actively in both individual and group activities such as descriptions, narrations, storytelling, conversations and discussions etc. This suggestion certainly implies the need for evolving an evaluation pattern which, along with testing the reading and writing skills, will give the learners an opportunity to use English in real-life situations.

English at the Degree Level

At the degree level, most of the students from rural areas being conscious of the need and importance of English in shaping their career, start learning it with both determination and serious efforts. They get motivated by the anticipated role of English in getting well-paid jobs in both public and private sectors while some of them having better proficiency in other subjects of their curriculum learn it seriously. These students take care to ensure that English does not become an impediment in their way of getting degree in the subject of their own interest where the concerned regional language is used as the medium of instruction. However, their motivation to learn English is discouraged by the syllabus designed with the presumption of their previous learning and also by the evaluation pattern used at this level. This is not to underestimate the approaches and methodologies used in this process of syllabus designing. Obviously, factors such

as age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, learning styles and learning strategies etc. are taken into account while designing the syllabus. But the generalization of these factors, in every context, is a matter of concern.

The syllabus designers think that if the students have studied English for six years at the secondary and for two years at the higher secondary level, they must be able to understand, read and write English. In some cases, editors are asked to select the texts or they make the random selection of texts as per their own likes and interests. But the reality is that these students are often not competent to cope with this syllabus. Consequently, after striving hard to learn and understand these texts, they surrender themselves to their destiny. Besides, their 'Anglophobia' lowers their confidence and hampers their overall performance.

If English is to be taught to these students not merely to meet the standard guidelines in higher education, but to improve their competency in this language, we should rather think over the possibility of introducing an option within the Compulsory English exclusively for the students from rural and semi-urban background at the degree level. This step might help the curriculum designers to give scope for the needs of English for both urban students, who want to learn English for advanced skills such as pronunciation, technical writings, report writings, presentations etc. and rural students, who need elementary English at least during the first and second years of their graduation.

The syllabus meant for rural students may comprise introduction to Basic English. Hence, it should include some topics emphasizing the connection between language structures (vocabulary, sentences, tense etc.) and the contexts from their surroundings (rather than the imaginary alien situations).

Conclusion

Thus, there is a need to understand the fact that students from rural areas run away from English not because they hate it but because they look at it as something beyond their capabilities and reach. This pessimism is the outcome of the negative teaching-learning conditions and the failure to understand, speak, read and write English despite learning it for six to seven years. Understanding the needs and abilities of the rural students, we need to think of revamping the syllabi and developing student-oriented teaching and evaluation methods. We need to understand that teaching of English should aim at the betterment and empowerment of the weaker sections of the Indian society; care should be taken to see that it will not become the

hegemonic means to throw them out of the stream of progress and development.

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